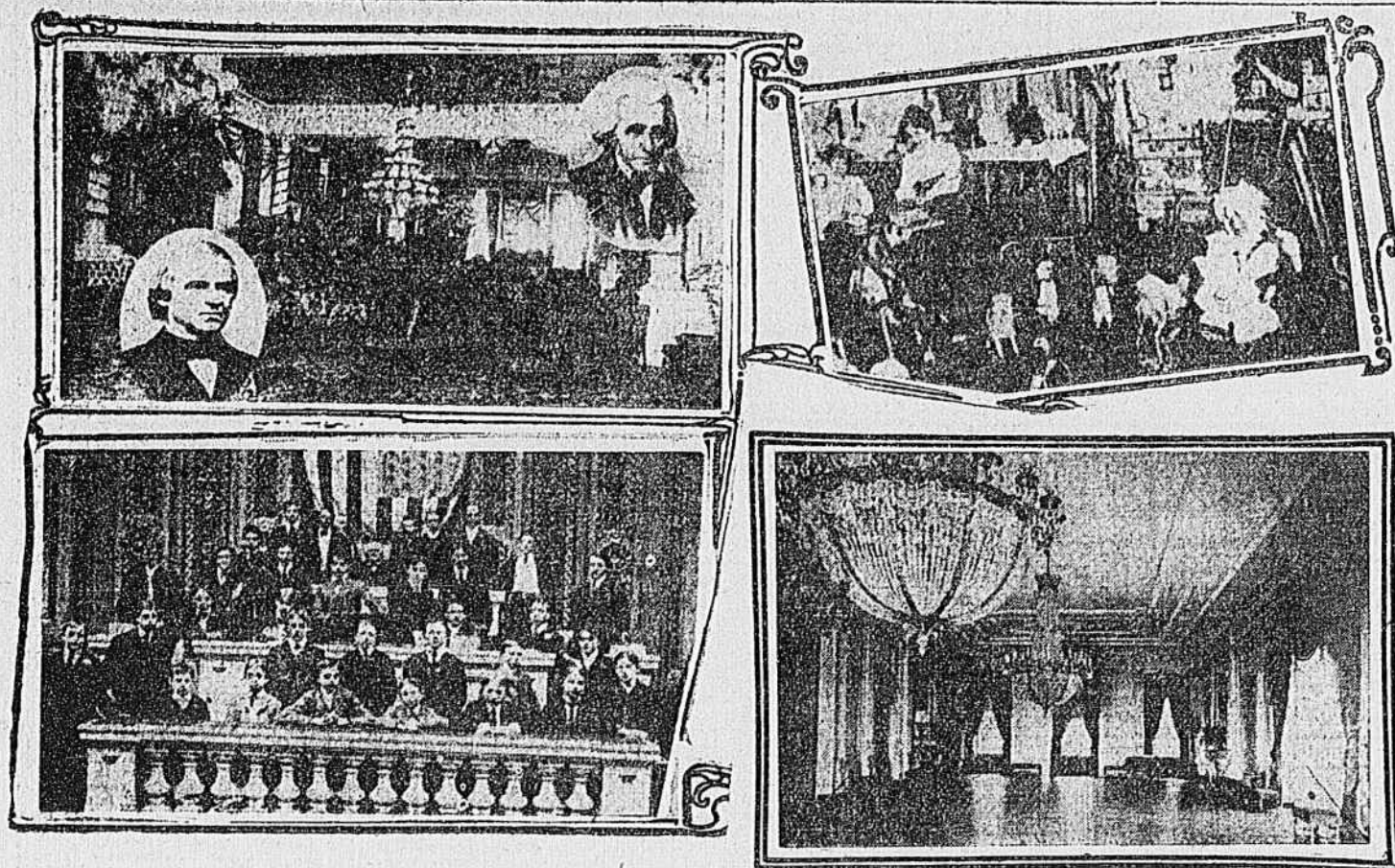


# Washington the Gayest Christmas Town



TWO NOTABLE CHRISTMAS HOSTS. Presidents Jackson (right) and Johnson (left) and old east room, scene of their Christmas parties. PAGE BOYS OF CONGRESS.

NURSERY, AUSTRIAN EMBASSY, CHRISTMAS MORNING. ETHEL ROOSEVELT'S CHRISTMAS BALLROOM, THE WHITE HOUSE.

BY JOHN ELFRETH WATKINS.

Washington, D. C., Dec. 24, 1911. AT last night, as I trudged homeward past the Capitol, a vast shadow suddenly flitted across the gray glare of the great dome, and, soaring above me like that monstrous bird of prey, the terrible "roar" of the "Arabian Nights" swooped down upon the dimly lighted plaza, almost at my feet.

Brought to a halt by the giant apparition, I stood as still—and, I fear, as white—as the marble statues which, from their pedestals, under the portico, shared my wondering gaze. No creature stirred within the haze of the park lights until, to my amazement, the round and waddling figure of a man descended from the mammoth bird. Making a sudden thrust at the monster, he caused it to utter a deafening note, like the wall of a colossal bee in agony, and as it cried its breath steamed like that of the dragon of old.

But as I stepped back, in greater fear than before, the old man silenced his winged steed, and beckoning me with a mitted hand, burst into a roar of jolly laughter, which put all my terrors to flight. And as I approached him I suddenly recognized that the beaming face behind his white, bushy beard and high fur-trimmed collar was that of an old and once beloved friend, whom I had not seen for more than thirty years.

"Hail! I!" So you had forgotten your old friend? chuckled the merry elf, his red, fur-bordered jacket threatening to burst as his knee expanded and shook within it.

"But, my dear St. Nick," said I, "you always traveled by reindeer and sleigh in the good old days when last we met, and I had least expected to see you descend in an airship, while, besides, Christmas eve is not until tomorrow."

"Well, dear boy, you see I am thoroughly up-to-date. The sleigh had to give way to the automobile and now the auto has given way to the aeroplane, for in a growing country like this I have to make double the visits that I undertook in the days when I had you on my list."

"And as for my coming here a day ahead of the old schedule—I have to, for, being the capital, Washington is the busiest and gayest Christmas town in all the land. In the first place, hundreds of people—from all corners of the country—now ask me to deliver their Christmas presents to my dear friend, the President, and these are what fill this extra load here. Most of them are silly and useless gifts, I admit, but he makes me return all things of an intrinsic value that come from people who are not his personal friends. That has always been the



"LINCOLN TOY SHOP" AND PRESENT PROPRIETOR.

rule. I remember having to take back a gorgeous brooch, set with a thousand dollars' worth of gems, which Mrs. Cleveland would not accept. That was the costliest Christmas present ever sent to the White House by other than a personal friend of the family. "And after I unload these gifts down the President's chimney I have yet a mission to perform for him before the sun rises. To each married couple of the White House he will send by me a big Christmas turkey. One hundred and two such fowls was the load last year, and it will be even more to-night, for in recent months there has been an epidemic of marrying below stairs in that grand old mansion!"

"Nor will the turkeys be all that I deliver for Mr. Taft," continued St. Nick, tightening the guy wire on the wing of his aero. "The unwarmed employees each get something, too, and there'll be a raft of presents for the

President's friends—gifts which, as usual, he has personally gone into the stores to select. And then, too, I will have to do a pleasant little chore for the Cabinet ladies, who have again clubbed together and bought Mrs. Taft a handsome Christmas present. Last year they gave her a beautiful diamond and ruby ring, and the year before a costly diamond brooch.

St. Nick and Uncle Sam.

"Uncle Sam and I have already had great fun outside the White House," Santa Claus continued. "To-day he had me at the forestry bureau, appearing in a play and handing out gifts to the children of all the employees. He had the big draughting room cleared for the show and turned it into a forest of evergreens, particularly the stage, where the huge Christmas tree twinkled with hundreds of lights. Some one has circulated the yarn that George Bentley, one of the forestry bureau's chiefs, has impersonated me at the last three of these celebrations, but I was really there. Then, too,

"TAD" LINCOLN AND HIS FATHER.

Uncle Sam and I have also had our usual Christmas tree party at the big Government Printing Office.

"I have also had to collect the annual gifts of Senators and Representatives to the page boys of Congress. And how I miss Senator Stanford, of California, who used to be my chief assistant in this task. He yearly gave me a crisp \$5 bill to be put in the stocking of each little page in the Senate."

Diplomatic Christmas Tree Parties.

"But the great fun begins to-morrow night—Christmas Eve." Kris Kringle went on to say. "Then most of the foreign ambassadors and ministers will give Christmas tree parties, which I must arrange, and it will keep me busy fastening the gifts to the pretty trees, many of which will be aglow with tiny electric lights of different colors."

"One of my best friends among these distinguished foreigners is the son of the diplomat corps, Baron Hengelmüller, the Austro-Hungarian ambassador, who for his little daughter, the Baroness Milla, gives yearly a big Christmas Eve party to which the children of the diplomatic family and officials are always invited. The baron has the great tree erected each year in his study, and when the little baroness unveils it, the youngsters, in a babel of foreign tongues, scream with delight at the spectacle of gorgeous gifts and goodies which I have hung from each twig and branch. At the Italian embassy they have a similar party, but string the fun out for three days. First, on Christmas Eve, the Yule log is lighted with great ceremony, and then after the gifts and refreshments have been heaped round, the family goes to mass at midnight, as again on Christmas Day, during which presents are exchanged. And finally on the day after Christmas, the ambassador gives a 'santini' or Christmas ball, to which the pretty debutantes of the season are invited. And so it goes. In each Christian embassy and legation, some holding their jolly Christmas tree parties on Christmas night instead of Christmas Eve, the French, according to their native custom, waiting until New Year's Day for their gift-giving ceremony—what they call Noel—and the Russians postponing their celebration till January 6, the Christmas of the Greek Church, whose calendar is twelve days behind ours."

"And, do you know, it has been one of the delights of my soul," chuckled old Kris, to see the Orientals of these legations jump right into our Christmas spirit—Siamese, Japanese, Chinese, Turks and Persians, alike, exchanging presents and hangings up their children's stockings.

Oriental Christmas.

"But the gayest Christmas ever enjoyed by Orientals in Washington was that of year before last, when the daughter of Special Ambassador Tong Shao Yi was married at the Chinese legation to Henry Chang, the new minister from China. The whole legation was banked with costly flowers. Upon a large square of red satin

there knelt side by side the bride in her gorgeous silks and jeweled head-dress, whose long fringe of pearl beads hung below her face, and the groom in his court robe and big red hat. And after the ceremony the bridal party with their guests assembled around a big tree, enjoyed a jolly American Christmas.

"No, my boy, you can't find Washington's equal during 'young people's week,' which begins to-morrow night. Cadet dances and cadet dinners for the resplendent youths home from Annapolis and West Point; debutante balls, debutante teas, debutante dinners, masquerade balls, domino balls and costume balls; eggog parties for the elders and dinner dances for all alike; house parties, box parties, skating parties, amateur vaudeville parties; windows graced by red-bowed wreaths, rooms banked with mistletoe, holly and poinsettia; orchestras playing, children giggling and old folks laughing everywhere; and your ubiquitous, humble servant dispensing gifts in scenes of the mansion! Is it any wonder that I call this capital city of ours the gayest Christmas town of the land?"

Santa Claus hopped upon the seat of his aeroplane and clutched the control lever.

"Wait," I protested. "Tell me something about Washington's past Yuletides—those which you have enjoyed the most."

"It's growing late, my son," answered the jolly old soul. "I must be off for the White House before the family awakes. But as an old fellow who has seen more than 1,600 winters should be pretty near his anecdote, I should not be stingy with anything so cheap as talk."

"Well, there was John Adams, the first tenant of the White House. His own children were growing, and he wanted to tell his tiny granddaughter, Susannah, who lived here with him. I brought her one Christmas a fine set of dishes which a little playmate, in a passion of envy, smashed all to pieces, whereupon Mistress Susannah turned snub and bit off the head of the little vandal's wax doll, also from my pack. Not a very happy Christmas party, was it?"

"The earliest grand frolic which I remember at the state house was the party which my great friend, Andrew Jackson, and I arranged for that jolly old man's little granddaughters and grandnephews."

Snowball Battle in East Room.

"Just as if it were but last night I can see those happy tots marching into the dining room, to the music of the 'President's March,' to enjoy the feast, for which Vivart, the chef, had donned himself proudly. In the midst of the big table was a gilt game-cock, surmounting a great pyramid of snow-balls, each made of starch-coated cotton. And at the end of the feast 'Old Hickory' distributed these missiles among his little guests, telling them to 'shoot' the high-gee tied one with a grand snowball fight. And maybe that grand old parlor was not a bedlam during the following hour! Nor was it a quiet spot while Vice-President Van Buren joined the youngsters in their games of 'blind man's bluff,' 'puss in the corner,' and 'forfeits,' or while the little girls tried to catch him under the mistletoe bough that I had hung from the big chandelier. Yes, it was a jolly party, and I can see those tots now, marching past the President, each in turn now kissing and bidding him a 'Good-night, general!'"

"And I recall also one Christmas Eve when those same White House children—two little Jacksons and five little Donelsons—hung up their stockings in 'uncle's' room, where one of the high-gies tied one of the President's socks to the top of the fireplace, crying, 'Now, let's see how Santa Claus will treat me, Mr. Uncle Jackson, President of the United States!'"

"I filled the President's sock along with the others," Santa Claus assured me, with a merry wink. "And, right at the moment when I was a miniature cooking stove for little Mary Donelson, to whom I also delivered for the French minister's wife, Mme. Serurier, a big boy doll in the red jacket, gold-striped trousers, plumed chapeau, spurs and sabre of a French soldier."

Fairy Ball at White House.

"But the most gorgeous Christmas spectacle seen in the White House during these early days was the 'fairy ball' given by President Tyler to his little daughter, Mary, who, as Titania, the fairy queen, with her silver wand, gossamer wings and a diamond star on her forehead, held her court in the East Room."

"Another famous Yuletide party before the war was that of the noted Baron Bodisco, the Russian minister, given a few years later in honor of his nephews. His quaint mansion on O Street, Georgetown, was illuminated that night not only by lights within, but by great bonfires outside, which, according to the Russian custom, were lighted for the comfort of the coachmen."

"I arranged a perfect fairyland inside the house. From the balconies I hung gray curtains, studded with dazzling mirrors and inclosing mysterious spaces, one of which contained wonderful red and gold swings, while another was piled high with gifts of all kinds—purses, picture books, boxes of kid gloves, fans, ribbons and toys, which I gave away with my own hands. After a round of jolly games the floor was cleared for dancing, and finally a delicious collation was served in the dining room."

A Cinderella of Real Life.

"This party proved to be another Cinderella ball, and the real Cinderella, who proved to be its star guest, was a pretty little Georgetown schoolgirl of only sixteen years, who, upon the eve of the festivities, had, like Cinderella, pined at home because the good baron had invited all of her playmates and had ignored her."

"Well, I played the fairy godmother for little Harriet (for that was her name—Harriet Williams). Peeping into her window Christmas Eve I saw that she was sad, and, guessing the reason, I took the matter up with the baron. Distressed beyond measure to find that, through an oversight, his intended invitation had not reached the girl, he at right down and wrote her an apologetic note, as well as a pressing invitation that she honor him the night of the ball."

"So pretty Mistress Harriet dried her tears and came to the baron's Christmas party, a radiant figure in her prettiest gown. And I remember how impatiently that nobleman awaited her coming—asking me to point her out to him, for he had never seen her before. It was a fateful meeting, for he fell in love with her at first sight, and before long (in 1845) they were married in the presence of the President and a distinguished company of officials, including the diplomatic corps in its dazzling court dress and the army officers in their resplendent uniforms."

"I haven't a very warm place in my memory," sighed St. Nick, "for those twenty childless Christmases which cast their gloom over the White House just prior to Lincoln's coming. But those Lincoln youngsters, Willie and Tad, made up for all this sad time on the first Yuletide they spent in the big mansion. Poor Willie, however, was destined to spend only one such holiday there."

Lincoln's Toy Shop.

"Again this year, as always since that winter, I shall stock up my pack partly with surplus goods from the old New York Avenue 'toy shop' now immortalized in fiction—where the sad, gaunt, martyred President, his shawl around his shoulders, used, personally, to purchase Christmas playthings for Tad and Willie and their playmates. In this old store a desecrated of the heart would supply Priester is still supplying the capital's youngsters with those things which lighten their little hearts on Christmas morning."

"And, speaking of 'Tad' Lincoln, I recall one Christmas morning when he and the White House cook had a tin of poor urchins whom Tad had brought in from the streets. Finally the President, in the height of his good humor, and some of his proteges are probably still boasting that they once ate Christmas dinner at the White House. 'One of the jolliest Yuletide parties in that old house was the ball given by President Johnson Christmas week, 1868, to 400 little boys and girls who nearly tripped through their waltzes, polkas and dances in that same great east room where Andrew Jackson's little guests had their snowball fight, and where Mary Tyler held her fairy court. Two little girls on this festive occasion did a Spanish dance, and at the close of the evening the grown-ups danced a 'square'."

Christmas Doll From the President.

"One of the prettiest Christmas in-

stances in which a President ever figured occurred in '89," St. Nick went on to say. "That year, while passing through Richmond, Ind., President Benjamin Harrison was surprised, in his car, by a tiny girl of four, who, when he took her upon his knee, threw her arms about his neck, kissed him impulsively and thrust a new penknife into his hand."

"When the next holiday time came," continued Santa Claus, "rumbling in a great fat wallet, 'the President' gave me a letter and a beautiful doll, both to be delivered to that same little girl on Christmas Eve. And here is a copy of that letter, which I shall always keep:

"My Dear Little Friend, Santa Claus has written you a letter into my ear at Richmond I did not see you until you stood at my feet looking up to me so sweetly that I did not know but that you had come into the room through the window. But when I picked you up and you gave me a kiss, then I knew it was a real little girl. The pretty knife you handed me I will keep (all you are a big girl, and when I go back to Indiana to live you must come to see me, and I will show you that I have not forgotten you. The little doll which you will find in the box with this letter is for you, and I hope you will think it pretty. If the doll could talk she would tell you how much I love to be loved by the little children."

affectionately yours,

"BENJAMIN HARRISON."

Santa Claus now put away his wallet, buttoned up his red jacket, pulled on his mittens and figured the level of his aeroplane as it threatened to fly off. But he could not suppress another happy recollection now flitting into his mind.

The Gruesome Christmas Party.

"I must not go without mentioning the gruesome Christmas party given in the White House at the end of the war, when she was but seventeen. The entire suite of state apartments was thrown open, and the hundreds of guests tipped into the grand stairway into the lobby, where the portraits of Presidents gazed across banks of Christmas greens and rows of huge vases of holly. The grand staircase, like a fairy princess, the flaxen-haired debutante, in her first ball gown—a lovely creation of white satin and gold—stood in the grand lobby, amid wagonloads of flowers, sent by friends from far and near. The Marine Band, in full uniform, tripped the light fantastic with the debutantes of the season and a long list of other young gentlemen. The grand staircase, in the front end of the east room, in which great apartment of so many memories the dazzling young diplomats, in court dress, as they glided across the floor to the music that sifted through a great screen of amylax and pink blossoms."

"And Helen Taft had as merry a time last Yuletide, which was her first following her debut. Every night of that Christmas week she attended both a dinner party and ball at separate houses, and one night she called me to the theatre between two such functions."

"But I must be off," added the garrulous old coddler. "My busy days is nigh at hand."

Even with your new aeroplane, how can you cover so much ground in so short a time?" I asked.

"Well, you see, I have a staff of assistants in the countries across the water. The three Magi all the stockings of all the little Spaniards and my sister Beatrice leaves the gifts for Italy's youngsters, while my brother Paganini and his servant Rupert do the business in Germany."

"Moreover," St. Nicholas concluded, "my work in Holland was finished three weeks ago, for I always attend to the little Dutchman on my birthday, December 6, and, as already intimated, I do not have to fill the shoes of the French babies till New Year's Eve, while my itinerary never calls me to Russia until December 8. So you see, my son, my jolly task is not so tremendous as most people think."

"With a cheery 'good night' the old gentleman pulled the lever and his Pegasus leaped into the air. And, despite the temperature of the night and the length of the discourse, I was not sensible of the chill that lurked in the midnight air, for Jack Frost cannot bite when good St. Nicholas is nigh."

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